What It Really Says: The Text Of The Bible

We have no original manuscripts of any of the books of the Bible. When we pick up a copy of the Bible to read, it is usually in a modern translation that we assume bears the meaning of the words of some Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek text. Debate in scholarly circles often surrounds the modern translations, but there is just as much debate surrounding the actual text of the Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek texts from which the translations are made.

The attempt to create a biblical text in the original languages is known as "Textual Criticism" and is common throughout the biblical scholarship of Western Christianity. For reasons that may become clearer in the following, many Orthodox Christians and most Jewish scholars are not as engaged in textual studies.

Textual Criticism and Its Goals

Current Bible translations are dependent on the work of previous generations in reconstructing the early forms of the books of the Bible. There are essentially two different goals for these studies.

One group of scholars attempts to reconstruct the original text of a given book as it was first written down by its first author. Textual criticism had its beginning in this search for the first formulation. It is understood by those engaged in this type of research

that the first text would be the most authoritative. Many textual scholars would argue that the author's manuscript would be the word of God itself; others only that the original would have the clearest presentation of the author's intent. In either case, numerous manuscript variations are compared in an attempt to determine which of the variations is most likely to have been the original from which the others deviated. Occasionally, several variants are used to produce a hypothetical original text for which there are no manuscripts that bear that reading. Few scholars in this endeavor believe we have as yet recovered the original text of any book of the Bible.

The other goal sought by textual scholars is to create the best possible manuscript of any given biblical book. Given that there are no original manuscripts from the hand of the first author for any book in the canon (and there is no hope of finding any such manuscript), the best that can be achieved is to reconstruct from various existing manuscripts the most reasonable text of each book. There is also the recognition among many of those engaged in this type of research that the original author's manuscript was not a biblical text. That is to say, one is only dealing with the text of the Bible at the point at which a given book has been declared to be part of a canon. By that time a book may have been edited several times. For example, there was no Book of Amos in any canon prior to its having been edited into the Book of the Twelve, since it was the Book of the Twelve that was declared canonical, and only later was Amos divided out of the larger scroll to stand as a book on its own, by which time it contained the editorial notations now understood to be part of the Book of Amos. Scholars of this tradition would be interested in the earlier material edited for the Book of the Twelve, but primarily are interested in recreating the best possible text for the Book of Amos as biblical text.

What We Translate

Should one head for seminary, the texts one is most apt to be confronted with as the Bible in its original languages are:

Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia, edited by R. Kittel and others (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1983). This is the Hebrew and Aramaic Tanak with pointing (vowels) and division markers, accents, and notes based on the Leningrad Codex, which is the oldest complete Hebrew

Bible (ca. 1000 C.E.). This work reproduces that manuscript, complete with copying errors, but provides students with a copy of the earliest full text of the Hebrew Bible.

Septuaginta, edited by Alfred Rahlfs (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1935). This is the standard introductory edition of the edited text of the Septuagint (the Greek Bible used by the Jews of ancient Alexandria, Egypt). It is a Greek text compiled from several Septuagint manuscripts. In general usage, the books that were collected by Rahlfs have come to be known as the books of the Septuagint, but the manuscript traditions contained works not included in this addition.

The Greek New Testament, edited by Kurt Aland and others (assorted Bible Societies, including the ABS, continuing updates). An ever-reedited Greek text of the New Testament books with numerous variant readings in the footnotes. Literally thousands of manuscripts are consulted to reconstruct the texts that appear herein, and editorial debates change readings on a fairly steady basis.(It should be noted that New Testament scholars tend to use a different Greek text, known generally as "Nestle-Aland.")

There are several other editions of biblical language texts available, and some religious traditions prefer other editions; however, all texts that are used for Bible translating in the Western Christian churches are edited texts.

When modern translators set out to make a new translation of the Bible, they have to begin by determining which Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek text they are intending to translate. Few modern translations are based on a single manuscript; instead they depend on textual critical reconstructions from several ancient manuscripts. However, the above-mentioned texts remain standard references for the endeavor (although Rahlfs is being replaced currently by a series of new volumes called "The Göttingen Septuagint"; textual studies never stand still).

Hebrew Bible

The Tanak has a textual tradition that extends back to the eighth century C.E. Prior to the standardization of the canonical texts by the Masoretes (a group dedicated to the preservation of the exact canonical forms of the books of the Bible and to a literal reading of

those texts) there was no set form to any of the books in the canon. Since the formation of the Masoretic Text, Jewish scrolls and bound Bibles have followed its formal text of the Hebrew and Aramaic. Until printing presses entered the western world, all copies of the Tanak were copied by hand, so there are still several variations among the many manuscripts; however, it is possible to determine the accepted Masoretic textual form because there are numerous manuscripts, and the Masoretes counted the words in every book and recorded the count at the end of each book when copied. Unfortunately, the Masoretes did not quite agree among themselves as to the exact text, so there are a couple of Masoretic traditions that provide a very few differences in their own manuscripts.

Since one form of the Masoretic Text has become the official Bible in the Jewish tradition, Jewish Bible translations into modern languages are based on one text, the official Masoretic. However, Christian scholars dealing with the Hebrew books of their Bible begin with the Masoretic Text, but supplement their translations with earlier Hebrew manuscripts. The most extensive early Hebrew texts are those that were found at the northwest edge of the Dead Sea hidden away in pottery jars during the first century C.E.

Almost any introduction to the Hebrew Bible contains a mention (if not a picture) of the Great Isaiah Scroll from the Dead Sea caves. It is usually mentioned as having the same Hebrew text as the Masoretic Text of the Leningrad Codex, as well as being the oldest complete Hebrew manuscript of a biblical book. It is close to being a complete text, but small sections along the bottom of the length of the scroll are missing and, while the text is very similar to the Masoretic Text, the spelling of words is quite different and there are a series of minor word changes (many of which are clearly scribal copying errors). What the introductions to the Hebrew Bible usually do not mention is that there are other Isaiah scrolls less similar to the Masoretic Text. Which suggests that if these all came from one community (which is not at all certain), they had more than one version of the Book of Isaiah, each being used as a sacred book, but that the textual content of the book itself was not yet considered sacred enough to be standardized.

In fact, portions of all the canonical texts of the Hebrew Bible except Esther are attested among the scrolls, as well as fragments and citations of many of the books that appear in the Christian Old Testaments beyond the canon of the Tanak. However, the Jeremiah

scroll does not conform to the later Masoretic Text, but is a Hebrew text along the line of the book of Jeremiah found in the Septuagint tradition (a differently written content ordered in a different fashion from the Masoretic Text). This demonstrates that the Septuagint Greek text was not a sloppily made copy of our Hebrew Jeremiah, but a decent copy of a different Hebrew text than that which became accepted in Palestine. The Samaritan Pentateuch also makes an appearance among the bits and pieces of Dead Sea Scrolls; so two versions of the Torah show up in the caves. It is clear from these fragments that, though books were declared canonical, in the first century C.E. the texts of the canonical books appeared in several forms. That being the case, it poses a problem for the textual critic who wishes to determine which of these variations represents the earlier, or more accurate, textual tradition.

But there are more manuscripts to choose from. Everything from medieval Cairo synagogue scrolls (which were set in a special room when they were wearing out and so were preserved because of the closed room; anything with the divine name written upon it is considered too sacred to be destroyed in Orthodox Jewish tradition, so synagogues from early times have a *genizah* for scrolls that have become too worn to be used anymore) to bits of mummy encasing strips taken from Deuteronomy used by ancient Egyptian undertakers (the book of Deuteronomy was merely scrap paper to the Egyptians) provide portions of Hebrew biblical texts. Many of these have variations in spelling and wording. Yet modern translators, almost without exception, accept the Masoretic Text as the base on which to adapt other textual attestations.

Greek Bibles: Old Testament

The Septuagint series of manuscripts contains different collections of books. All contain a certain core of books, covering essentially the Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible and certain Deuterocanonical books. The Septuagint was the product of the Alexandrian Jewish community, which wanted a copy of the biblical books in its everyday language, since Greek was necessary for daily life (Alexandria was a Greek city in Egypt, founded by Alexander the Great—and named after him).

There are numerous copies of the Greek Old Testament Bible. A number of additions and some subtractions from the text of the Hebrew Bible as we know it occur regularly in the various manuscripts; many of these clearly were written into the Hebrew text

before the time of the translators as amplifications to the Hebrew narratives (the retelling of Esther is the most glaring example of this) and some appear to have come from other Hebrew textual traditions than that behind the Masoretic Text (both the Samaritan Pentateuch and the Septuagint add to Cain's comment to Abel in Genesis 4:8 a phrase that appears to make the murder premeditated). And, of course, the Deuterocanonicals appear in the Septuagint manuscripts but not in the Palestinian Hebrew canons.

As with the Hebrew manuscripts, the Greek Bibles were hand copies that produced a number of variants in the text. Since there was a tradition that the books being copied already had the status of sacred text, the number of differences among the Septuagint texts in manuscript is smaller than one might suspect. However, the differences between the Hebrew being translated and the Greek into which the works were being translated often proved to be major, the classic example being the changing of the Hebrew "young woman" of Isaiah 7:14, to the Greek "virgin" (enough said).

Because the Greek manuscripts formed the basis of Christian Bibles, the early Christian Old Testaments conformed to the books as they were produced in Alexandrian Greek. The Greek Esther and the Greek Daniel are obvious examples of books with additions to the Hebrew texts. Some books simply had two versions; Tobit has a longer text (English translations in the New English Bible and the New American Bible) and a shorter text (as in the Revised Standard Version) both of which appear in Bibles and both of which are "canonical." Yet other books, like Job, had a change in tone through the process of translation, such that the church picked up the Greek twist on the narrative (the heavenly officer of the Hebrew text, "The Divine Prosecutor" has become Satan, "the devil," a rather major change that would color all further use of the Book of Job in all Christian traditions). When the official Catholic Latin Bible (the Vulgate, translated mostly by Jerome) was in production, consultation was made with contemporary rabbis, and changes were made in the Septuagint text being translated to conform to the Hebrew Text where Jerome's theology would allow such changes. This produced a rather critical edition for its time of a Greek text as the basis of the Latin Bible's Old Testament. Much of the Septuagint textual tradition passed into Western Christian Bibles through use of the standardized Latin Vulgate.

Greek Bibles: New Testament

The Old Testament textual critical work seems too simple for words when set against the problems of determining a text for the New Testament books. The early church did not consider these books sacred and so were not terribly careful about copying them. If someone wanted a copy of the Gospel of Mark, but wanted a resurrection narrative at the end of it, they added it. If another wanted the Gospel of Luke, but preferred Matthew's telling of a particular story, they put Matthew's version in Luke's Gospel where they wanted it. If someone didn't like what Paul said about some particular thing, they left it out, or added something extra to make up for it. They corrected the Greek vocabulary, they corrected the grammar, they corrected the stories, the letters, the symbolism. In short, from the over 5,000 Greek manuscripts of early New Testament books (and then there are the early translations into Latin, Syriac, Aramaic, Gothic, Coptic, and so forth) there are a staggering two hundred thousand variant readings.

There is no Masoretic textual tradition for New Testament books. By the time the Bishops at the North African Council in Carthage in 397 C.E. determined the canon for the New Testament they were discussing books for which each of them, in their home parishes, was using a slightly different text. Many of the differences are minor, but almost every chapter of every book in the New Testament has phrases that appear in some manuscripts and not in others. Sometimes it can be easily determined that a given manuscript was written by someone paraphrasing a text, or changing texts to their liking, but more often the problem is to discern among several equally possible readings as to which is better or earlier.

The earliest New Testament manuscripts are from Egypt and are bits and pieces of books made from papyrus (water reeds whose stalks were split and then glued together crosswise to make sheets). Most of these are small parts of a text, though a nearly complete copy of a book of Paul's letters from ±300 C.E. has survived with enough strange changes to interest almost anyone (the compiler believed Hebrews to be a letter of Paul but did not believe the Pastorals were Pauline, while Romans 16 is treated as a separate letter by Paul altogether).

The manuscripts that are the most important for early New Testament textual criticism are known as "uncials." These are texts written entirely in capital Greek letters and on parchment (scraped animal hide). These were codices and often contained both the Old

and New Testaments. The two most important of the ±250 known uncials are referred to as Codex Sinaiticus (because it was discovered by Western scholars at Saint Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai—the monks already knew about it) and Codex Vaticanus (because it is part of the Vatican library collection). Both codices were copied in the fourth century, and both contain more books than the New Testament now contains; however, they provide early and nearly complete texts of the New Testament books, though, of course, with differences. Indeed, the parchment codices have traditionally been divided into "Western" and "Eastern" traditions, with some manuscripts using aspects of both traditions. Major differences can be followed through the two trajectories, but the individual manuscripts in both traditions had plenty of unique readings of their own. Thus, the texts of the canonical New Testament books were not as established as even the texts of the Old Testament books in use at the same time.

The Byzantium Church used its own Greek manuscript; based on an uncertain textual tradition of the early church, it was used for public readings of the Bible throughout the existence of the Byzantine Empire and so has become accepted as authoritative in the Greek Orthodox Church. Generally simply called the Byzantine text, its origins, both for the Old and New Testaments, appear to have been texts in use before the reign of Constantine. Other Greek manuscripts are considered by many in the Orthodox churches as inferior and are generally dismissed by Orthodox scholars in favor of the established text. Having an established text in the Orthodox tradition precludes the need for extensive textual studies as done in the Western churches, where the official Bible had been a Latin translation, insofar as there was an established text at all.

In 1515 Erasmus of Rotterdam began work on an edited Greek New Testament, using such early Greek manuscripts as were available to him at the time (neither Sinaiticus nor Vaticanus was yet known in scholarly circles); the finished product was published in 1516 and became the basis for all New Testament translations throughout Europe and the Americas until the late nineteenth century. All the canonical books of the New Testament were studied and provided with a critical Greek text. The only problem was the very end of the Book of Revelation, for which there were no extant Greek manuscripts; Erasmus solved this problem by translating the Vulgate Latin into Greek. Other scholars added to Erasmus' Greek

text notes and comparisons with another early Greek manuscript and in 1624 an advertising campaign by Elzevir Publishers in the Netherlands proclaimed that you too could buy the accepted "received text" of the Greek Bible. The advertising pitch phrase "Textus Receptus" caught on and is used to this day for the Erasmus Greek Bible. Many, particularly conservative, Christian denominations continue to use Erasmus' Greek text as the definitive Greek New Testament text and so do no other textual studies.

A Little Overlap

When the New Testament authors quoted their Bible they quoted what they were familiar with in their own religious life. Since the writers of the New Testament texts wrote Greek, they quoted the Greek Bible. For modern translators this presents a problem. As shown above, the Greek Septuagint text was not the same as that of the Hebrew Tanak. Moreover, there were other Greek translations of the Bible in use at that time that were outside the circles of the Septuagint manuscripts, so the New Testament has quotations of the "Law and the Prophets," some of which are found in the Septuagint, some of which are from other Greek translations, and some of which have no extant parallels.

Of course, occasionally the New Testament citation will be to the Hebrew text. The cry of Jesus on the cross in Mark 15:34 makes sense in context only if the quote is kept in the Hebrew, since the passage is describing the misunderstanding of the people around the cross, hearing "Eloi" as "Eliya." Moreover, Jesus quoting the first line of the psalm conforms to rabbinic traditions of citing an entire psalm by quoting its first line.

For the modern translator who wishes to use the best early Hebrew text for the Old Testament and the best early Greek New Testament text in a Bible containing both testaments, this produces a problem. Most of the quotations in the New Testament made from the Old Testament will not be the same in English when the translator finishes translating from the best manuscripts, since the Greek New Testament represents the Greek Old Testament tradition and the Hebrew Old Testament represents another tradition. The usual manners of dealing with this problem have been to translate the Greek as it appears and let the reader wonder about the difference, to change the Greek a bit to make it conform more to the Hebrew translation in the Old Testament, or to place a footnote in at the bottom of the text explaining the difference.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What is the difference between having a canonical book and having an established textual content for that book?
2. Is there then a difference between the Bibles of the church's Old Testament (Greek tradition) and the Tanak (Hebrew tradition), or can one just switch them around? Contemplate the Protestant Bible, which uses the Greek New Testament , and the Hebrew Bible for its Old Testament.
3. What problems can you imagine related to having to create the basic text before you can translate it?
4. Some Jewish and Christian traditions hold that the text has been kept pure as God dictated it; how can that position be adapted to the textual traditions, or can it?
5. What happens should another early manuscript appear with yet more variations in the texts of the books it bears?

Bibliographical Note

For the Old Testament section, Ellis R. Brotzman, Old Testament *Textual Criticism: A Practical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994), was useful; and for the New Testament section, Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament, Volume Two: History and Literature of the Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1982), was helpful.